

Investigating Discourses of COVID-19 Anti-Vaccination Movement in Cyprus: Insights from Speeches in Onsite Protests

Marilena Paraskeva

University of Cyprus



Keypoints

- COVID-19 anti-vaccination movement discourse so far has been considered in the form of anti-vaccination linguistic/discursive trends in social media, while it has not been sufficiently considered in Greek-speaking contexts.
- Insights from speeches in anti-vaccination onsite protests in Cyprus show that these speeches include four main topics: *government/governors/politicians*, *vaccines/vaccination/(un)vaccinated*, *measures*, and *children/parents*.
- The influences/resources of these speeches derive from the political, religious, social, scientific, and historical spheres/domains.
- The linguistic strategies used by speakers involve representations of processes and social actors which include – and exclude thereof – certain actions and ‘doers’ in specific ways.
- Local governing bodies, health-related professionals, and other policymakers can all benefit from the results of this project through tangible actions that will inform and affect anti-vaccination proponents.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic, among other things, has brought about many issues that have been topics of culture wars. One such topic is pro-vaccination versus anti-vaccination, leading to the COVID-19 anti-vaccination movement worldwide. Members of this movement appear to hold conservative political beliefs (Whitehead & Perry 2020) and to be affected by political leaders in relation to conspiracy theories; the latter being closely associated with anti-vaccination attitudes (Hornsey 2021). They also shown to identify with Republican white Evangelical religious beliefs (French 2021) and with political and cultural suspicions (Dionne 2021). In the Greek context, vaccination and health measures opponents are reported to fall under two groups: a moderate group and a more radical one. The moderate group comprises people who are susceptible to conspiracy theories, parish priests’ advice, and to ideas of personalities who are against modern science and general vaccination. The radical group is very often associated with violence or even far-right extremism, and it is involved in spreading fake news and anti-vaccination propaganda online (Karakatsani 2021).

An additional and central manifestation of COVID-19 anti-vaccination sentiments is language and/or discourse, which has been mainly considered in the form of anti-vaccination linguistic/discursive trends in social media. For example, in discussions on the COVID-19 vaccine in Reddit “skeptical/aggressive remarks” are the predominant topic in anti-vaccination users’ comments and concerns (Wu, Lyu & Luo 2021), while in discussions in Twitter,

anti-vaccination proponents, albeit with fewer tweets, display greater engagement and greater emotional and conspiracy theory-related content as compared to pro-vaccination proponents (Germani & Biller-Andorno 2021). Regarding online anti-vaccination discourse in the Greek context, which is very sparsely considered so far, anti-vaccination proponents appear to consider vaccination as a threat for Orthodox Christians and as a means of killing children (Karakoulaki & Dessì 2021). Anti-vaccination proponents' antisemitic narratives, albeit non-dominant, involve the ideas that a group of powerful Jewish people are orchestrating vaccination for controlling the world, and that unvaccinated are comparable to Jews prosecuted during WWII (*ibid.*).

Against this focus on the anti-vaccination movement language and/or discourse as presented online, this project examines the discourses contained in speeches as articulated in COVID-19 anti-vaccination onsite protests in Cyprus, where approximately 73% of the whole population has been fully vaccinated so far.¹ Hence, this project bridges the gap caused by both the absence of research on the oral discourses articulated in anti-vaccination onsite protests and the very limited consideration of the anti-vaccination discourse in Greek-speaking contexts.

The focal points of analysis upon subsequent results, conclusions and recommendations are based on the following:

- **the main topics included in the speeches**
- **the range of implicit and explicit influences/resources upon which the speeches draw to support their arguments.**
- **the linguistic strategies that the speeches contain to persuade the public on certain (anti-) vaccination ideas and, in turn, shape the beliefs and knowledge of the public.**

Methodology

In terms of methodology, relevant data from different settings were collected during January 2022 and February 2022. This involved attending various anti-vaccination protests and video recording (onsite) speeches given during the said protests. The process of data collection also worked backwards by searching for and collecting past speeches of anti-vaccination protests that are available in the social media in the form of shared videos.² In the latter process, July 2021 was set as the starting period from which videos would be collected in a backward fashion on the grounds that a period of eight months (from July 2021 to February 2022) would suffice for obtaining adequate speech samples from recent anti-vaccination protests. This was coupled with the fact that many anti-vaccination protests involving speeches took place from July 2021 to August 2021 and, thus, certain samples of them were deemed appropriate to be collected.

The stage of data collection was followed by the transcription and analysis of the speeches. Data analysis employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, which informed one another obtaining in this way a more holistic picture of the forms and functions of the speeches too.



¹Source: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, "COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker."

<https://vaccinetracker.ecdc.europa.eu/public/extensions/COVID-19/vaccine-tracker.html#uptake-tab> [information current as of 24 October 2022].

² All processes abided by GDPR.

Project results and conclusions

- **Main topics included in the speeches**

The data analysis revealed that four main topics were included in the speeches. The most frequent topic was *government/governors/politicians*, followed by *vaccines/vaccination/(un)vaccinated*, *measures*, and lastly *children/parents* (Figure 1).

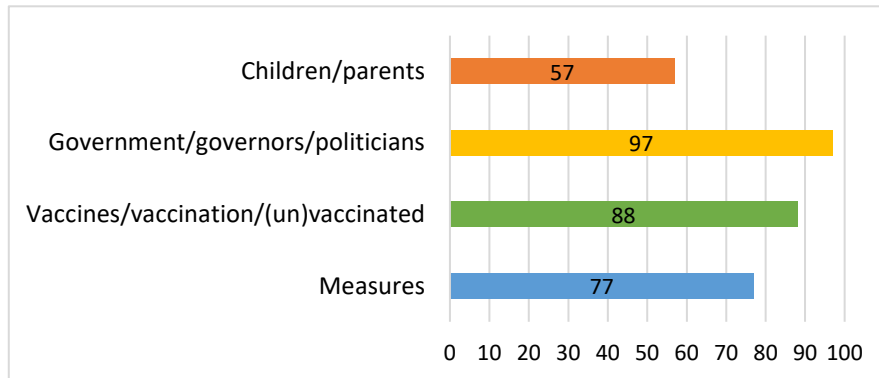


Figure 1. Frequencies of topics included in the speeches

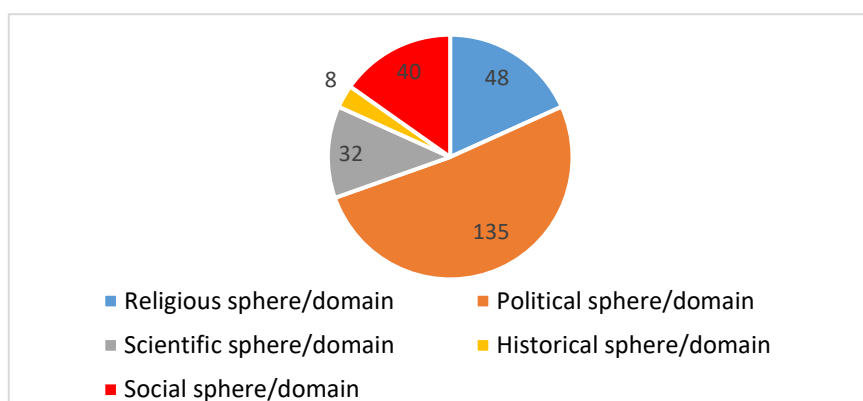
The most frequent topic, i.e., *government/governors/politicians*, was distinguished into two subtopics, namely *accusing government/governors/politicians* (N=66) and *appeals/demands from government/governors/politicians* (N=31), and the second most frequent topic (*vaccines/vaccination/(un)vaccinated*) into three subtopics: *questioning the vaccine's efficacy and effectiveness* (N=31), *against vaccination* (N=52), and *the idea of vaccinated people spreading the virus* (N=5). As to the third most frequent topic, that is *measures*, it clustered into two major subtopics, i.e., *being against measures* (N=70) and *alternative explanations of measures* (N=7), while the least frequent topic (*children/parents*) branched into four subtopics: *protecting/fighting for children* (N=27), *disapproving child vaccination* (N=13), *disapproving measures in children* (N=10), and *parents being in a difficult situation* (N=7).

A striking finding in relation to the point of being against vaccination, which was identified in both the *vaccines/vaccination/(un)vaccinated* and *children/parents* topics, was that in the former topic the great majority of instances of objection related to mandatory vaccination, whereas in the latter topic (*children/parents*) the objections were on vaccination wholesale. This suggests that anti-vaccination supporters are more reluctant to accept vaccines on children than on adults.

In addition, the finding that *accusing government/governors/politicians* was the most frequent subtopic across speeches in terms of number of instances seems to indicate that anti-vaccination proponents consider the governing bodies responsible for the situation to which they object, and they can be said to act as an opposition party.

- **Implicit and explicit influences/resources of speeches**

In relation to the influences/resources on which the speeches are based to support their arguments by means of various intertextuality forms, these derive mainly from the political sphere/domain, with the ones following being the religious sphere/domain, the social sphere/domain, the scientific sphere/domain, and the historical sphere/domain (Figure 2). These accord with the findings on the main topics included in the speeches, where the most frequent ones revolved around *government/governors/politicians*.



As for the forms of intertextuality that the speeches contain, results reveal that speakers tend to use those ones that enable them to invoke influences/resources in a less obvious way, which affords them the opportunity to tap into various spheres/domains just by bringing in voices relevant to specific discourses (Fairclough 2003), and, thus, less explicitly.

- **Linguistic strategies contained in the speeches**

In terms of the linguistic strategies that the speeches contain to persuade the public on certain (anti-)vaccination ideas and, in turn, shape the beliefs and knowledge of the public, the analysis of the representation of processes via linguistic structures showed that the most common process related to describing the current situation and providing relevant information. The second most common process was used to characterize or identify the anti-vaccination proponents' stances towards vaccines and relevant practices, while the third most common process represented what the anti-vaccination proponents need, want, feel, and know and what the government and the Archbishop (supposedly) need, want, feel, and know (or should). The least common process mapped onto appeals/demands towards the government/governors/politicians and the Archbishop, and quoting or reporting studies/statements mainly in favour of vaccines' lack of efficacy. Overall, the most significant exclusions from the processes were representations of the vaccines' safety and effectiveness, with speakers selectively drawing upon only those pieces of information, quotations and reportings that show otherwise.

In addition, the consideration of the representation of social actors has revealed that social actors tended to be excluded, which was ascribed to the use of null subjects and nominalizations; the latter serving the exclusion of agents of actions. There where social actors were included, these were individuals, groups of individuals, or the government/governors in the form of pronouns, nouns or both pronouns and nouns. Interestingly, when speakers represented themselves, they only used pronouns and no equivalent nouns at all, contrary to the use of both nouns and pronouns when representing other individuals, groups of individuals, or the government/governors. This finding suggests that anti-vaccination proponents opt out of identifying themselves with specific nominals.

Social actors were also mainly activated, i.e., as 'doers', and in those cases where they were passivated, they were represented as affected by processes for which others are responsible. Further, social actors were always personally (versus impersonally) represented, showing that speakers did not aim at dehumanising social actors. Lastly, classified representation in all but one cases was used, through which social actors were either specifically represented, e.g., certain individuals, groups or the anti-vaccination proponents, or generically represented, e.g., individuals abstractly or the government/governors. A striking contrast between specific and generic representation is that specific representation included instances of the collective 'we' in referring to the anti-vaccination proponents, whereas generic representation included the use of abstract 'you' in referring to the government/governors by and large. This is important, because it shows that anti-vaccination proponents identify as members of a specific group, the 'we' group, which is distinct from – or even opposing to – the 'you' group, and can be said to afford them a collective identity (see also Wodak 2012).



[Picture source: www.philenews.com – altered]

Policy recommendations and implications

In light of the results and conclusions of this project, a number of recommendations are put forth:

Recommendation 1

- ⇒ The identification of the main topics included in the speeches contributes to the documentation of the current state of the arts in relation to the thematic and argumentative trends of anti-vaccination supporters as attested in protests in Cyprus. This documentation is useful for the local government/governors/politicians as the most frequent topic in the speeches, and especially because of the accusations towards government/governors/politicians made by the anti-vaccination proponents. Since the latter hold the government/governors/politicians responsible for the situation to which they object, **it is imperative that the local governing bodies redesign an informed communication plan towards the public in such way that it addresses anti-vaccination proponents' concerns too.**

Recommendation 2

- ⇒ Local *government/governors/politicians* can consider the documentation of the thematic and argumentative trends of anti-vaccination supporters comparatively with other states or countries in order to identify universal features, and, in turn, **establish cross-country synergies for forming common or parallel plans of action in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including responses to anti-vaccination proponents. These plans of action should focus on the issues of measures, vaccines, and children as well as the role of each local government so as to be explicit and transparent to the public.**

Recommendation 3

- ⇒ The fact that anti-vaccination supporters seem to be more reluctant to accept vaccines on children than on adults can be addressed by **medical doctors, paediatricians, the local epidemiologic team and health professionals in general, who can deliver jargon-free seminars, workshops and other informative sessions especially on the safety of vaccines for children, drawing on results of relevant updated medical and scientific studies. This will lay the ground for building a culture of trust towards vaccinations.**

Recommendation 4

- ⇒ The identification of the range of influences/resources of the speeches is very useful in that prominent stakeholders of each of these spheres/domains of influence, i.e. the political, religious, social, scientific, and historical spheres/domains, can engage constructively in communicating pro-vaccination messages. As such, **policy makers can invite politicians, priests, theologians, social influencers (e.g., singers, actors/actresses etc.), scientists, medicals, and historians to participate in targeted campaigns like TV and online spots, for enlightening the public, and especially the anti-vaccination proponents, in relation to the safety of vaccines, thereby affecting change.**

Recommendation 5

- ⇒ The analysis of the grammatical composition of the speeches' clauses in terms of how processes and social actors are represented provides insights into the perspectives projected (or not) in the speeches such as "[...] who is represented as causing what to happen, who is represented as doing what to whom" (Fairclough 1989: 51). These are significant because they uncover the covert ideologies and power relations of the speakers, which are valuable for policymakers as can they gain a deep understanding of the underlying beliefs and attitudes of anti-vaccination supporters (*cf.* Goldman *et al.* 2020). To operationalize this, **policy-relevant stakeholders can hire experts in medical sciences, sociology, linguistics, psychology, politics, and other germane sciences, who will monitor, record, analyse and report anti-vaccination proponents' online and onsite stances and trends. These processes will be the basis for preparing responsive material, e.g., press releases, policy briefs, newsletters, fact checks, radio and television programs, and podcasts, which will also tackle misinformation, disinformation, and fake news spreads.**

Opinion piece

“We have never been in a better position to end the pandemic. We are not there yet. But the end is in sight. We can see the finish line. We are in a winning position. But now is the worst time to stop running. Now is the time to run harder and make sure we cross the line and reap the rewards of all our hard work.”



[Picture source: www.bbc.com]

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General, 14 September 2022

[Opinion piece source: <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/who-chief-says-end-sight-covid-19-pandemic-2022-09-14/>]

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Author contact details

This project was conducted by Dr Marilena Paraskeva who can be contacted at paraskeva.marilena@ucy.ac.cy

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